

The invention of Homer: a sculptural account

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We are all familiar with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But we have few solid facts about their author: were the poems composed by the same person and, if so, was this person Homer? Where was Homer born? Was he blind or sighted? Was 'he' perhaps a 'she'?! Nigel Spivey takes us through some more concrete ways in which the ancients gave a face to the legend.

Did Homer ever exist? That question still troubles classical scholars, but it is probably fair to claim that most of us believe that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were concocted by a single poet – even if he was not the first to tell such stories, and his version of them was later subject to interference. We will suppose, as many people supposed in antiquity, that this 'Homer' hailed from the region of Ionia, in the eastern Mediterranean – Smyrna, perhaps, or the island of Chios – and may accept that he flourished in the eighth century B.C., with Hesiod as a younger contemporary. Once we have faith in the name, we crave a personality – some glimpse of the genius whose words resonate down the centuries of Western literature with paternal authority. And then the question becomes – what did Homer look like?

Giving a face to a name

As Pliny the Elder noted (*Natural History* 35.2.9), the 'yearning' (*desideria*) to come face to face with a famous person of the past will overcome the non-existence of a portrait. (And since we know that even portraits of Pericles and Socrates were produced after they had died, the practical problems of not knowing what the real Homer looked like are reduced slightly.) So images of Homer were created; beginning, so far as we can tell, in the first half of the fifth century B.C. They were transmitted by way of coins, gems, paintings, and mosaics – but primarily by sculptures, some of which must have been full-length statues. What survives, however, is a considerable quantity of heads presumably derived from such statues. And it is here that our problem begins: for these heads, taken together, display an extraordinary variety. Can they all be the same man? Classical archaeologists divide them into four types, but there are consid-

erable differences even within each type. More examples of the 'Hellenistic Blind Type' survive than of the others, but there seems never to have been an agreed image of Homer in antiquity. It was not even definitively established that the poet was blind.

This lack of agreement needs explaining. Ancient authors report honorific images of Homer at Olympia, Delphi, Alexandria, and in prominent public places elsewhere in the Greek world. Modern excavation shows that there were heads of Homer in private settings, especially during Roman imperial times. One would have expected his facial features to be stabilized as a result; as they were, broadly speaking, for other Greek worthies – thanks to the practice of taking plaster casts, and making copies. One would have also expected the canonization of his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to have helped here: one universally recognised text, one universally recognisable author. First written down in the sixth century B.C., Homer's epics were made into 'standard editions', in particular by scholars of the Alexandrian court. By the time of Virgil, 'Homer' the work had become *the* Homer, down to the last syllable. So why was there no comparable process for 'Homer' the portrait? In the first century A.D. an educated patron might still buy or commission alternative types of the Homer-image. Why did Homer's image remain so fluid?

The history of the different types

Recognising who is depicted in an anonymous marble head is rarely easy. The 'recognition' of Homer as an ancient portrait-type can be traced back as far as the sixteenth century, when a number of scholars produced illustrated catalogues of famous men and women, chiefly from

classical antiquity. An enthusiastic late antique description of a statue of Homer on display in Constantinople c. A.D. 500 encouraged them to look for a face that was old but not senile, benevolent, majestic, inspired – and possibly with eyesight problems (unhelpfully, the poetic description reports a Homer who was 'blind, but did not seem so'). Coins, which, unlike most sculptures, do bear inscriptions identifying their portrait-heads, gave hints of a Zeus-like outline.

Gradually, sculpted heads too, albeit mostly detached from their bodies and a secure archaeological context, began to be labelled. Over time, more heads were identified as Homer, until the publication in 1939 of a catalogue of 'the whole corpus'. In its view, all of the Homers out there belonged to one of four types. Either they were of the obviously blind 'Epimenides type' (so-called because scholars had previously thought that they represented the sixth-century philosopher, Epimenides of Knossos, a figure famous for falling asleep for 57 years in a cave on Crete and awaking with the gift of prophecy) with its long, slim face and archaic-style hair and beard. Or they belonged to the 'Modena type' (named after a small bronze bust in Modena, Italy, which unusually is inscribed OMĒROS) – similar to the Epimenides type in most respects except for the crucial difference that its eyes are open and apparently seeing. This leaves the 'Apollonius of Tyana type', which was clearly created a couple of centuries later than the others, and which chooses not to deprive Homer of his sight, and the later still 'Hellenistic Blind type', with its recessed, almost half-closed eyelids. All survive as Roman copies; they would, therefore, have co-existed in antiquity.

Casting oneself in Homer's image

Some would say that it makes a considerable difference to the understanding of Homer's poetry – whether he kept a keen eye-witness to the world, or else was given extraordinary inner vision by divine grace. So why was there such visual ambivalence about his legendary blindness? A famous relief in the British

Museum shows ‘The Apotheosis of Homer’ – the poet, crowned by ‘Time’ and ‘the World’, in company with the Muses, Apollo, and Zeus. It was most likely produced c. 200 B.C., and associated with the court of the Ptolemies. It does not help us much in our search for the most authentic image of Homer: he is here a stately old gentleman, whose busy beard obscures his facial features. But it may help us come to terms with the range of Homers on offer. One possible reading of the relief is that it marks a victory at an Alexandrian-sponsored poetry-contest. The name of the victor remains unknown, but if this suggestion is followed, then it may be presumed that, in dedicating this *stèle*, he thought of himself as a modern Homer – descended, as it were, from the original and best.

He would not be the first to cast himself in Homer’s image. A special group of performers of epic poetry from Chios known as the *Homeridai* traced its ancestry back biologically to Homer. And indeed it seems that any poet could stake a claim upon the DNA of Homeric genius. Stesichorus, for example, the archaic lyric poet credited with making Homeric-style epic suitable for selective performance at the symposium, was said to have ‘the spirit that was once Homer’s’ residing in his breast. And the later dramatic poet, Theodectes, included an image of Homer on his own memorial on the sacred way from Athens to Eleusis. In Republican Rome the Latin epic poet, Ennius, not only imagined meeting Homer in a dream but presented himself as possessed, like Stesichorus, with his soul. Soon, poets from Virgil in the first century B.C. to Quintus Smyrnaeus in the third century A.D. were competing for the accolade of being hailed a ‘second Homer’. With poets so keen to cast themselves in Homer’s image, it is a small step to accept that Homer was (re-)cast in their image. Their cultivation of his image can explain the existence of a corpus of portraits which are different from each other and yet ‘the same’.

Semper florens Homerus

Suppose that a patron – one of the Ptolemies, it may be, or some cultivated Roman – commissions a sculptor to produce a statue of Homer. Compare the painter Rembrandt, in seventeenth-century Holland, being asked to produce an image of Aristotle. The artist’s challenge, in either case, is rather similar: how can a ‘likeness’ be made convincing when the subject is so remote? And we know enough about Rembrandt’s habits to guess how he proceeded. He would have invited some suitably mature, bearded, and perhaps even philosophical citizen of Amsterdam to pose in the studio as a

stand-in for Aristotle. (Rembrandt, typically, hardly disguises this stratagem: his Aristotle makes no effort to dress like an ancient Greek.)

We have no proof at all that Rembrandt’s ancient equivalents resorted to a live model. At the same time, it looks as though our Homer sculptors did not care to make copies from a standard mould. And indeed, if the poet’s spirit were believed to animate his would-be successors, we may imagine strong justification for making his stereotypical image more human, more personable even. So on the early imperial reliefs known as the *Tabulae Iliacae* we find the figure of Homer apparently reading from a scroll. No matter that the historic Homer was part of an oral tradition that predated literacy. The artist’s prime concern here is to pin the patriarchal bard to the now standard versions of his great poems, inscribed in epitome above his head, thereby creating a continuum between the moment of their creation, their transcription in the sixth century B.C., and their re-ception in the Roman period. For Homer to satisfy as the fount of all of this, he has to appear sufficiently stately yet also convincing as a modern scholar: someone who was not old and/or beggarly beyond impersonation. Hence the image of *semper florens Homerus*, Homer for ever flourishing: a benevolent presence in the mind’s eye of every classical student.

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